

2005 George Wright Society Biennial Conference
People, Places, and Parks
Concurrent Session Abstracts—Thursday, March 17, 2005

National Heritage Areas I: Current Research into their Social Meaning, Policy Evaluation, Qualitative Indicators and Future Management Models

As interest in creating new national heritage areas and extending existing areas grows, the program is under pressure to demonstrate its value in conserving traditional communities, to develop measurable indicators, and to build a body of theory and practice. This panel highlights current research from a variety of disciplines that showcases the diversity of the heritage area movement and provides the first steps in evaluating these complex regional conservation strategies; and provides a stronger foundation on which to develop future National Park Service policy. The work in the Blackstone National Heritage Area and in the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area tests an evaluative approach that seeks to understand the impact of heritage areas on the quality of life of designated regions. The work in the Northern Rio Grande in New Mexico and the Mississippi Delta looks at the role heritage plays in engaging residents and managing the future community and economic development of diverse communities.

The paper sessions

Towards An Anthropological Understanding Of Heritage Area Development (Tom Guthrie)

This paper, based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, critically examines the social meaning of heritage area development through a New Mexico case study and considers the prospects for social scientific research on heritage areas. The Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area, a cultural conservation and economic development project being developed by local citizens and the NPS, will commemorate the 400-year “coexistence” of Spanish and Indian peoples in north central New Mexico. I present an overview of my research on the cultural politics of this project, then discuss several questions that my research attempts to answer. Under what social and political conditions do people begin thinking about their lives in terms of “heritage”? What does heritage area designation mean to people and how does it affect their lived experience? What methods can researchers employ to study the social, cultural, and political conditions of heritage area development on a regional scale?

Evaluating National Heritage Areas: Program Analyses & Policy Implications At The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Daniel Laven)

Management of U.S. national parks has evolved to reflect changes in the American conservation movement. By 1990 the mission of the NPS had grown to include stewardship of cultural, natural and historic resources, urban-proximate parks, and national heritage areas. Although an emerging body of literature describes the evolution of the heritage area movement, research is needed to address a fundamental question related to the development of future NPS policy concerning heritage areas: How well are designated heritage areas working? Using a case study design, I will employ a policy evaluation framework to answer this question. The first case examines the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (BRVNHC). Results from this study provide feedback to program managers and participants at BRVNHC as well as contribute information to the development of a NPS Heritage Areas Program. Additionally, this study offers a framework for conducting future multi-case evaluations of NPS heritage areas.

Quality of Life Indicators in Two Small Towns in the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (Molly Levin)

Successful heritage development is dependent upon understanding and addressing the differences and similarities of towns and jurisdictions within a heritage region. This paper is based on ethnographic field research in the small towns of Hayesville and Crossnore, North Carolina. Quantitative data, such as new businesses, loss of buildings, and population change, were documented. Residents were interviewed and their answers were coded according to the quality of life indicators that surfaced in their answers. An analysis of the findings led to the formulation of thirty-seven indicators for quality of life, some shared and others unique to each town. While towns in the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and Southern Appalachia are often grouped together by policymakers and planners, the differences between Hayesville and Crossnore are quite clear, and reflect a range of values and concerns that can inform the development of local and regional heritage policy, planning, and management.

Higher Education Institutions And Community-Based Tourism Development: The University-Based National Heritage Area Model In Perspective (Rolando Herts)

The Mississippi Delta is a culturally significant but economically depressed region where cultural heritage tourism (CHT) is being viewed as a viable economic development strategy, as well as a way to empower historically marginalized groups by affirming their contributions to American cultural heritage. Empowering these groups as valued stakeholders is crucial, as effective CHT planning and development is said to require a collaborative, community-based approach. One stakeholder that is playing a role in advancing the community-based National Heritage Area (NHA) designation process is Delta State University. The university could become the management entity of the Delta NHA; however, whether or not a university-based NHA is most appropriate in this context is yet to be determined. Using a proposed typology of university-community-based tourism development approaches, this paper considers the potential effectiveness of the university-based NHA model in a region whose cultural heritage has been shaped largely by socioeconomic and racial conflict.

A Practitioner's Perspective On How Research Advances The Heritage Areas Movement (John Cosgrove, Executive Director, Alliance of National Heritage Areas)

Research on national heritage areas provides positive direction and focus to the practical advancement of the field in numerous ways. While practitioners are preoccupied with addressing the pressing needs of their constituents and resources, research provides the third party perspective of what is working and what can be improved.

Research confirms and dispels what professionals think they know about the heritage development movement. Through thoughtful consideration of the movement's history and context, research provides pragmatic approaches to visioning, development, planning, and implementing heritage development projects. It showcases the lessons learned and provides guidance as the movement grows and matures. It identifies trends and provides suggestions to address the challenge of continuing education for industry practitioners. Finally, research validates the argument for "casting the net wider" to align a range of interests and partners, to integrate natural and cultural resource challenges, and to sustain meaningful relationships.